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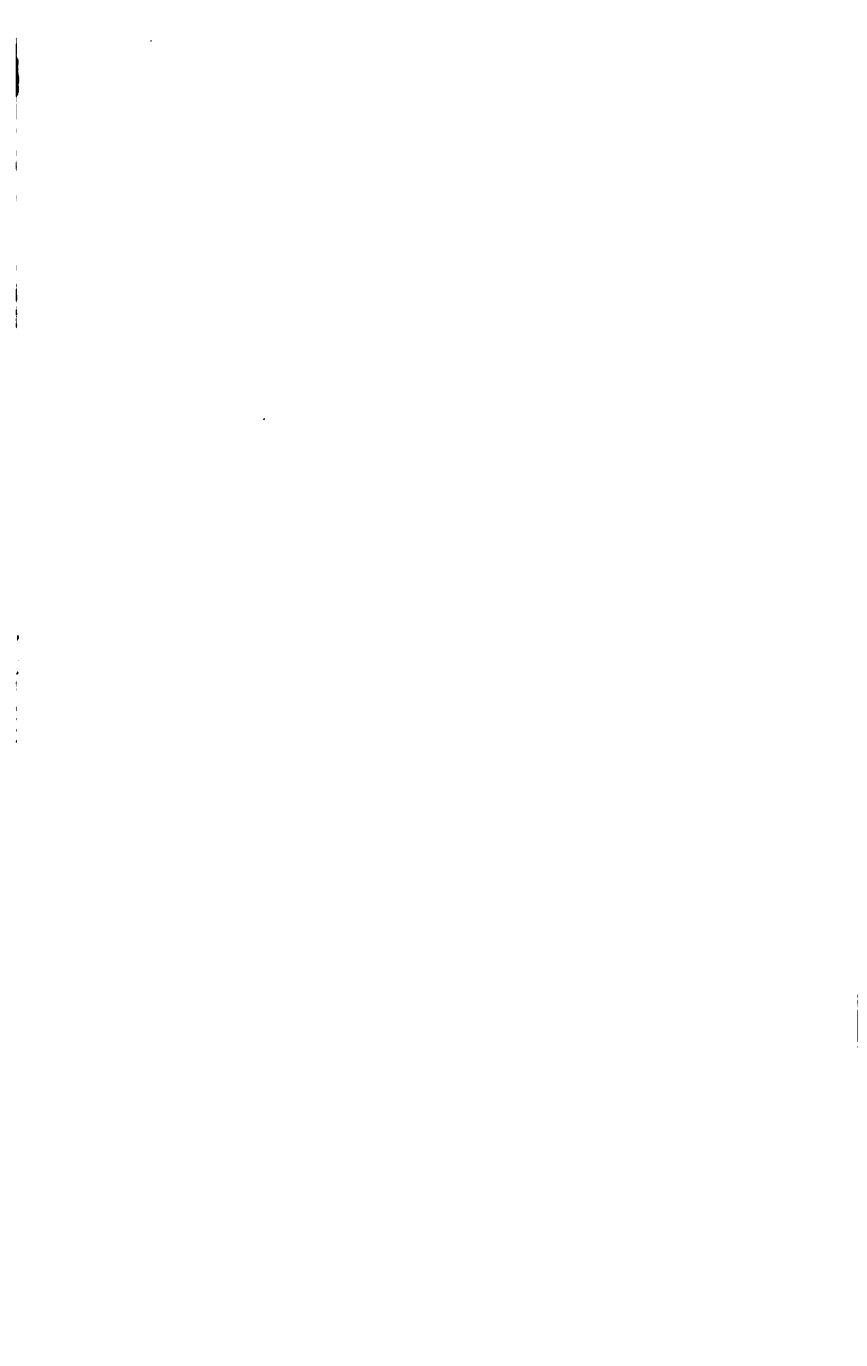


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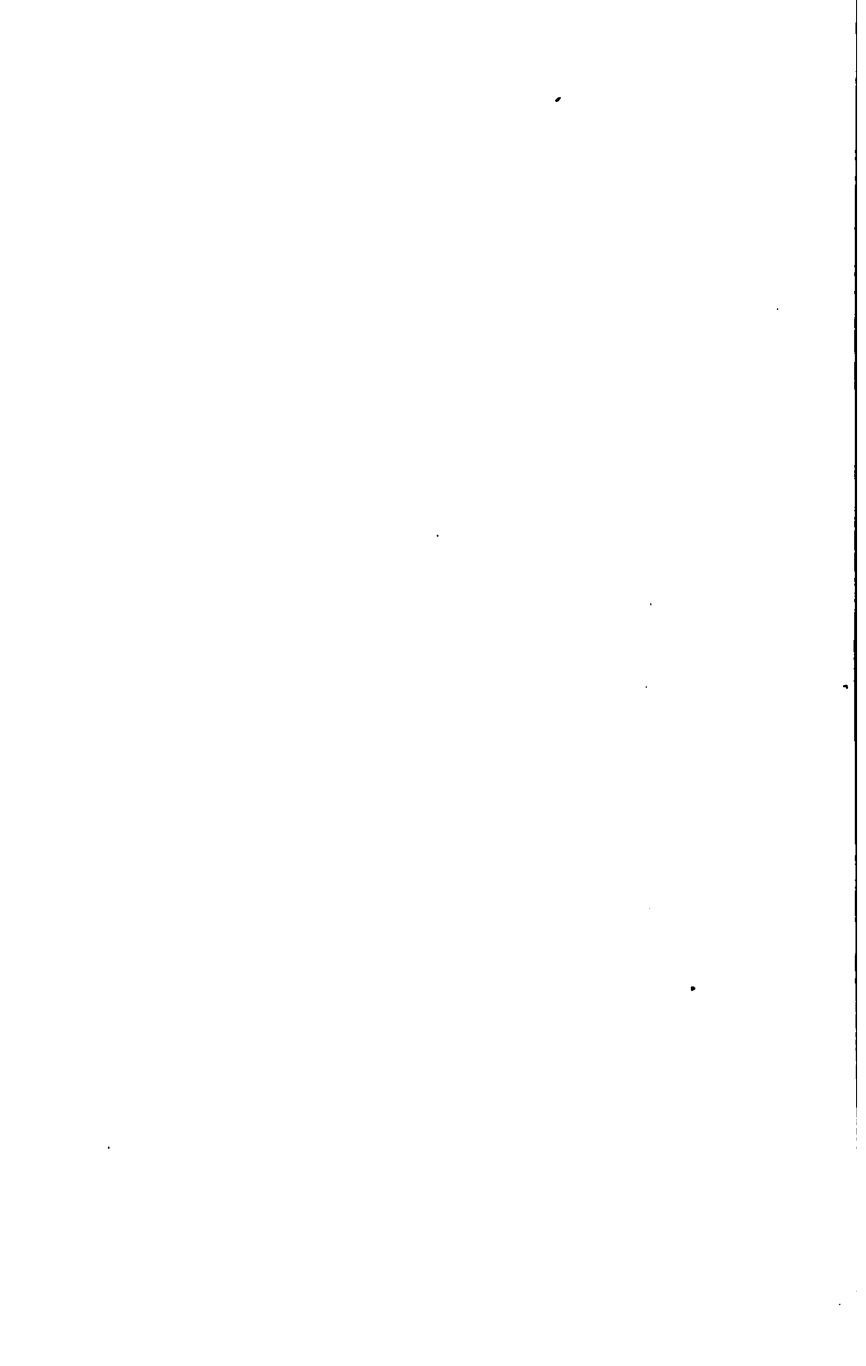


BURIED ALIVE

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BURIED ALIVE

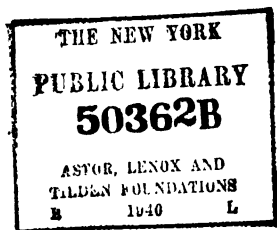
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BURIED ALIVE

By
EMILE ZOLA

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BURIED ALIVE.

IT was on a Saturday, at six o'clock in the morning that I died after an illness of three days. My poor wife had been digging down into a trunk for the past minute, looking for some linen. When she raised up and saw me rigid, my eyes open, my breathing stopped, she rushed up thinking I had fainted. She touched my hands, bent over my face. Then terror seized her; and stunned, she stammered, bursting into tears,—

“My God! my God! he is dead!”

BURIED ALIVE.

I heard everything, but the sounds were muffled as if coming from a distance. Only my left eye perceived a confused light, a whitish glimmer in which objects melted away; my right eye was completely paralyzed. It was a syncope of my whole being, as if a thunder-stroke had annihilated me. My will was dead,—not a fibre of my flesh obeyed me. And, in that nothingness, above my inert limbs, my mind alone remained, slow and lazy, but perfectly clear.

My poor Marguerite cried, on her knees beside the bed, repeating in a rendering voice,—

“He is dead! My God! he is dead!”

Was this, then, death,—this singular state of torpor, this flesh struck with immobility, while the intelligence was still active? Was it my soul that was lingering in my skull, before taking its flight? Since my child-

BURIED ALIVE.

hood, I had been subject to nervous attacks. Twice, when I was very young, I had almost died of virulent fever. Then, those about me had become accustomed to seeing me sickly. And I had myself forbidden Marguerite to go and fetch a doctor, when I went to bed the morning of our arrival in Paris, in that hotel in the rue Dauphine. A little rest was all I needed,—it was the fatigue of the journey that had broken me up. Yet I suffered frightful agony. We had left the country, suddenly, very poor, having barely enough to last until I should receive my first month's salary from the management with which I had secured a position. And now an attack suddenly carries me away!

Was it really death? I had imagined a blacker night, a heavier silence. When a little fellow, I already feared to die. As I

BURIED ALIVE.

was delicate and everyone petted me pityingly, I constantly thought that I would not live, that I would be buried young. And that thought of the earth caused me a terror that I could not accustom myself to, although it haunted me day and night.

While growing up, I held to that fixed idea. At times, after days of reflection, I believed that I had conquered my fears. Ah, well! one died,—it was finished; everybody would die some day; nothing could be more convenient nor better. I almost succeeded in being gay; I looked death in the face. Then, a sudden shiver froze me, caused my head to swim, as if a giant hand had dangled me over a black chasm. It was the idea of the sod that returned and banished my reasonings. How many times, at night, I have awakened with a start, not knowing what breath had passed over my slumber, join-

BURIED ALIVE.

ing my hands in despair, muttering, "My God! my God! I have to die!" An anxiety oppressed my bosom; the necessity of dying appeared more abominable in the giddiness of the awakening. I went to sleep again with difficulty; sleep worried me, it so closely resembled death. Suppose I should sleep forever! Suppose I should close my eyes and never open them again!

I do not know if others have suffered this torment. It has spoiled my life. Death has stood between me and all that I have loved. I remember the happiest moments I have spent with Marguerite. In the first months of our marriage, as she slept at my side, as I thought of her in dreaming of the future, invariably the expectation of a fatal separation embittered my joys, destroyed my hopes. We would have to part, perhaps to-morrow, perhaps in an hour. An immense

BURIED ALIVE.

discouragement took possession of me; I asked myself what was the use of being together, as long as it would have to end in a cruel parting. Then, my imagination took pleasure in mourning. Who would go first,—she or I? And either alternative melted me to tears, in exposing the picture of our broken lives. In the best periods of my life, I have thus had sudden melancholy moods that no one understood. When any good luck came my way, everyone was astonished to see me gloomy. It was that, like a flash, the idea of my death had crossed my joy. The terrible “What’s the use?” sounded like a knell in my ears. But the worst of this torment is that one endures it in secret shame. One dares not tell it to anybody. Often the husband and the wife, lying side by side, shudder from the same thought when the light is extinguished; and

BURIED ALIVE.

neither one speaks of it, for one does not talk of death, any more than one pronounces certain obscene words. One fears it to the point of not naming it, one hides it as one hides his sex.

I reflected on those things, while my dear Marguerite continued to sob. It troubled me greatly not to be able to assuage her grief by telling her that I did not suffer. If death was nothing but this swooning of the flesh, truly I had been wrong to dread it so. It was a selfish comfort, a repose in which I forgot my cares. My memory, above all, was extraordinarily vivacious. My entire existence passed rapidly before me, like a scene to which, from now on, I felt myself an alien. It was a strange and curious sensation,—it was as if a far-away voice related my own history to me.

BURIED ALIVE.

There was a corner of the country near Guirande, on the road to Piriac, the remembrance of which pursued me. The road turned, a little wood of pines straggled down a rocky slope. When I was seven years old, I went there with my father to a half ruined house, to eat pancakes with Marguerite's parents, who were even then making but a poor living from the neighboring salt-works. Then, I recalled the college at Nantes, where I had grown up, wearied by the old walls, with a continued desire for the large horizon of Guerande, the salt marshes below the town, extending out of sight, and the immense sea, spread out beneath the sky. There, a black hole opened up—my father died; I entered the administrative department of the hospital as an employee. I began a monotonous existence, my only joy being my Sunday visits

BURIED ALIVE.

to the old house on the Piriac road. Things there went from bad to worse, for the salt-works brought in hardly anything, and the country was falling into great distress. Marguerite was still only a child. She loved me, because I wheeled her around in a barrow. But, later on, the morning when I asked her hand in marriage, I understood from her startled gesture, that she thought me frightful. Her parents gave her to me right away. That relieved them. She, submissive, had not said "no." When she had accustomed herself to the idea of becoming my wife, she no longer appeared much dissatisfied. The day of the wedding, at Guerande, I remember it rained in torrents; and, when we reentered the house, she had to go about in a petticoat, for her dress was soaked.

BURIED ALIVE.

That was all my youth. We had lived some time down there. Then, one day, on returning home, I found my wife crying bitterly. She was bored,—she wanted to leave there. At the end of six months, I had saved up a little money, made cent by cent from supplementary work; and, as an old friend of the family found me a position in Paris, I brought the dear child here, so that she would not cry any more. On the train, she laughed. At night, the benches of the third-class being very hard, I took her on my knees, so that she could sleep more comfortably.

That was the past. And, now, I had just died on that narrow couch in a hotel, while my wife, fallen on her knees upon the stone floor, lamented. The white spot visible to my left eye paled little by little; but I remembered the room clearly. To the left

BURIED ALIVE.

was the chest of drawers; to the right, the mantelpiece, in the middle of which a crazy clock, without a pendulum, indicated six minutes past ten. The window opened on the rue Dauphine, black and deep. All Paris passed there, and with such noise that I could hear the window panes rattle.

We knew no one in Paris. As we had hastened our departure, I was not expected in my position until the following Monday. Since I had been forced to take my bed, it was a strange sensation to be imprisoned in that room, into which our journey had thrown us, still confused from fifteen hours on the train, stunned by the tumult in the streets. My wife had nursed me with her smiling gentleness; but I could feel how anxious she was. From time to time, she went to the window, glanced into the street, then returned quite pale, fright-

BURIED ALIVE.

ened by this great Paris of which she knew not one stone and which roared so terribly. And what would she do, if I never awoke again? What would become of her in that immense city, without any means of support, ignorant of everything?

Marguerite had taken one of my hands, which hung lifeless at the edge of the bed; and she kissed it, and she repeated wildly,—

“Olivies, answer me! My God! he is dead! he is dead!”

Death was not, then, oblivion, since I heard and reasoned. It was only the void that had terrified me since my childhood. I did not imagine the disparition of my being, the total suppression of what I was, and that for always, during centuries and centuries, without my being able to live again. I shuddered at times, when I found in a paper a future date of the next century,

BURIED ALIVE.

I would certainly not be alive on that date; and the thought of that year of a future that I should not see, where I should not be, filled me with anguish. Was I not the world and would not everything crumble when I passed away?

To dream of life in death,—that had always been my hope. But this was not death, without a doubt. I should wake up in a little while. Yes, in a little while, I should bend over and seize Marguerite in my arms and dry her tears. What joy to find each other again! And how much more we should love each other! I should take still two days of rest, then go to my position. A new life should begin for us, happier, larger. Only I was in no haste. A while ago, I was too exhausted. Marguerite was wrong to despair so, because I had not the strength to turn my head on the pillow to smile at

BURIED ALIVE.

her. By and by, when she says again, "He is dead! My God! He is dead!", I shall kiss her, I shall murmur very low, so as not to startle her, "No, dear child; I was asleep. Thou seest that I am alive and that I love thee!"

BURIED ALIVE.

II.

At the cries of Marguerite, the door was brusquely opened, and a voice exclaimed,

“What is the matter, my neighbor? . . . Another attack,—yes?”

I recognized the voice. It was that of an old woman, Madame Gabin, who lived on the same floor. She had shown herself very kind since our arrival, being moved by our position. Right away, she had told us her history. A relentless landlord had sold her furniture, last winter; and since that time,

BURIED ALIVE.

she lodged at the hotel with her daughter Adele, a girl of ten years. They did cut-out work on lamp-shades; forty cents was as much as they could make a day.

"My God! Do you mean to say this is the end?" she asked, lowering her voice.

I knew that she was approaching. She looked at me, touched me, then she resumed pityingly,—

"You poor little thing! You poor little thing!"

Marguerite, prostrated, sobbed like a child. Madame Gabin raised her, seated her in the broken-legged armchair near the mantelpiece; and there she tried to console her.

"Really, you are going to do yourself harm. Because your husband is gone is no reason for you to kill yourself with despair. Very true, when I lost Gabin, I was just like

BURIED ALIVE.

you. I was three days without being able to swallow a mouthful. But that didn't help matters,—on the contrary, it made them worse. . . . Now, see here! For the love of Heaven, be reasonable!"

Little by little, Marguerite quieted down. She was at the end of her strength; and, from time to time, she was shaken again by a fit of crying. During this time, the old woman took possession of the room, with a peevish authority.

"Don't you bother about anything," she repeated. "Dede has just gone to deliver the work. And neighbors should always help each other. Your trunks are not completely unpacked. But there is linen in the drawers,—isn't there?"

I heard her open the chest of drawers. She must have taken a napkin which she brought and spread upon the night-table.

BURIED ALIVE.

Then, she struck a match, which made me think that she lighted a candle from the chimney to serve as a taper. I followed her every movement in the room, I accounted for her slightest action.

"That poor gentleman!" she murmured. "It is fortunate that I heard you scream, my dear."

And, all of a sudden, the dim light I perceived through my left eye disappeared. Madame Gabin had just closed my eyes. I had not felt her finger on my eyelid. When I understood, a slight chilliness began to creep over me.

But the door again opened. Dede, a maiden of ten years, entered, calling out in her flute-like voice,—

"Mamma! Mamma! Oh! I knew I should find you here! Here is your money, three francs and four cents. . . . I brought back twenty dozen shades."

BURIED ALIVE.

"Sh——! Be quiet!" vainly repeated the mother.

As the child continued, she pointed to the bed, Dede stopped short, and I felt that she was nervous and backing toward the door.

"Is the gentleman asleep?" she asked in a low voice.

"Yes. Run away and play," answered Madame Gabin.

But the child did not go. She must have been staring at me with big eyes, bewildered and understanding vaguely. Suddenly, she seemed seized with a mad fear; she ran out, overturning a chair.

"He is dead! Oh! Mamma, he is dead!"

A profound silence reigned. Marguerite, prostrated in the armchair, had ceased crying. Madame Gabin still prowled around the room. She began speaking in a suppressed voice,—

BURIED ALIVE.

"The children of to-day know everything. Look at that one! God knows if I am bringing her up right! When she goes on an errand or I send her to deliver the work, I calculate the minutes, to be sure that she does not play in the streets. . . . That makes no difference; she knows everything; she knew at a glance what was the matter. Yet, she had never seen but one corpse and that was her uncle Francois, and, at that time, she was not four years old. . . . Well, there are no more children. . . . What can you do about it?"

She interrupted herself. She jumped to another subject.

"You know, my dear, we must think of the formalities, the declaration at the mayoralty, then all the details of the funeral. You are not in a condition to look after those things yourself, and I don't wish to leave

BURIED ALIVE.

you alone. So, if you will permit me, I am going to see if Monsieur Simoneau is at home."

Marguerite did not answer. I witnessed those scenes as if from a great distance. It seemed to me, at moments, as if I were floating like a subtle flame in the air of the room, while a stranger, a formless mass, reposed lifeless upon the bed. Yet, I could have wished that Marguerite would refuse the services of that Simoneau. I had seen him three or four times during my short illness. He occupied a room near ours, and proved himself very obliging. Madame Gabin had related to us that he was only for a short time in Paris, where he had come to collect some old debts due his father, who had retired to the country and died recently. He was a tall young fellow, very handsome, very strong. I detested him, perhaps, be-

BURIED ALIVE.

cause he was in such good health. The evening before, he had come in again, and I had suffered on seeing him seated near Marguerite. She was so pretty, so white beside him. And he had looked at her so intently while she smiled at him and told him that he was very good to call and inquire after me.

“Here is Monsieur Simoneau,” murmured Madame Gabin, who had returned.

He pushed the door softly open, and, as soon as she saw him, Marguerite again burst into tears. The presence of that friend, the only man she knew, reawakened her sorrow. He did not attempt to console her. I could not see him; but, in the shadows that enveloped me, I conjured up his face, and I saw him clearly, troubled, grieved to find the poor woman in such despair. And how beautiful she must have been, with her

BURIED ALIVE.

blond hair uncoiled, her face pale, and her dear little childish hands burning with fever.

"I put myself at your disposition, madame," murmured Simoneau. "If you wish to leave everything to me . . ."

And she could answer only with broken words. But, as the young man left the room, Madame Gabin accompanied him and I heard her mention money as she passed close to me. That always costs so much; she feared the poor little woman had not a cent. In any case, they might ask her. Simoneau told the old woman to be quiet; he would not have Marguerite tormented. He would go to the mayoralty and order the funeral.

When the silence began again, I asked myself if this nightmare would last long. I was alive, since I perceived the slightest

BURIED ALIVE.

exterior happening. And I began to take stock of my condition. This must be one of those cases of catalepsy of which I had heard. Once, when I was a child, at the time of my serious nervous illness, I had syncopes lasting several hours. Evidently, this was an attack of that nature; which held me rigid as in death, and deceived everyone around me. But my heart would resume its beating, the blood would again circulate in the muscles, and I would awake and console Marguerite. Reasoning thus, I exhorted myself to patience.

The hours passed. Madame Gabin had brought her breakfast. Marguerite refused to take any nourishment. Then, the afternoon slipped by. Through the open window rose the noises of the rue Dauphine. From a slight clinking of the brass candlestick on the marble of the night-table, it

BURIED ALIVE.

seemed to me that they were changing the candle. At last, Simoneau reappeared.

"Well?" the old woman asked in an undertone.

"Everything is arranged," he answered. "The funeral will take place to-morrow at eleven o'clock. . . . Don't you worry about anything and don't mention anything before that poor woman."

Madame Gabin began again nevertheless,-

"The doctor of the dead has not come yet."

Simoneau went to sit beside Marguerite, said a few sympathetic words, and then was quiet. The funeral was for the next day at eleven o'clock; those words sounded in my brain like a knell. And that doctor who had not come, that "doctor of the dead," as Madame Gabin called him. He would see right away that I was simply in a lethargy.

BURIED ALIVE.

He would do what was necessary, he would know how to wake me up. I awaited him with frightful impatience.

Still, the day glided away. Madame Gabin, not to lose time, had ended by bringing in her lamp-shades. Even, after having asked Marguerite's permission, she brought in Dede, because, she said, she did not like to leave children long alone.

"Come along, come in," she murmured, leading the little girl, "and don't be stupid. Don't look over there, or I will attend to you."

She forbade her to look at me; she found that more proper. Dede certainly must have stolen a glance my way from time to time, for I heard her mother slap her on the arm. She repeated furiously,—

"Work, or I shall make you go out. And to-night, the gentleman will go and pinch your toes."

BURIED ALIVE.

Both the mother and the daughter placed themselves at our table. The noise of their scissors cutting out the shades came to me distinctly. The shades, very delicate, exacted careful handling, for they did not work fast; I counted them one by one, to combat my growing agony.

And, in the room, there was nothing but the slight noise of the scissors. Marguerite, vanquished by fatigue, must have been drowsing. Twice, Simoneau got up. The abominable idea that he was taking advantage of Marguerite's sleep to touch her hair with his lips tortured me. I did not know that man, and yet I felt that he loved my wife. A laugh from little Dede completed my irritation.

"What are you laughing at, you imbecile?" her mother asked her. "I am going to put you out on the landing. . . . Well, what are you laughing at?"

BURIED ALIVE.

The child stammered. She had not laughed, she just coughed. As for me, I imagined that she had seen Simoneau bend over Marguerite and that it seemed funny to her.

The lamp was lighted when there came a knock at the door.

"Ah! Here is the doctor," said the old woman.

In effect, it was the doctor. He made no excuses for coming so late. Doubtless, he had had many flights of stairs to climb during the day. As the lamp lighted the room but feebly, he asked,—

"Is the body here?"

"Yes, sir," answered Simoneau.

Marguerite had risen, trembling. Madame Gabin had put Dede out of the room, because there is no need for a child to witness such things; and she hastened to drag my wife

BURIED ALIVE.

to a window, to spare her the spectacle.

And yet, the doctor had approached with a rapid step. I divined that he was tired, hurried, impatient. Had he touched my hand? Had he placed his on my heart? I could not say. But it seemed to me that he had simply bent over indifferently.

Shall I hold the lamp so that you can see?" asked Simoneau obligingly.

"No; it is not necessary," said the doctor calmly.

What! Not necessary! That man had my life between his hands, and he considered it unnecessary to proceed with a thorough examination. But I was not dead! I wanted to shout that I was not dead!

"At what time did he die?" he asked.

"A six o'clock this morning," answered Simoneau.

BURIED ALIVE.

A furious revolt rose in me, in the terrible bonds that held me down. Oh! To be thus powerless to speak, powerless to move a limb.

The doctor added,—

“This heavy weather is bad. . . . Nothing is more exhausting than these first days of spring.”

And he was going away. It was my life that was going away. Cries, tears, curses suffocated me, rent my convulsed throat, through which not a breath passed. Oh! the scoundrel, whose professional habits had made a machine of him, and who came to the bed of death with the idea of going through a simple formality! He knew nothing,—that man! All his science was false, since he could not at a glance distinguish between life and death. And he was going away, he was going away!

BURIED ALIVE.

"Good-night, sir," said Simoneau.

There was a silence. The doctor must have bowed to Marguerite, who had turned round again, while Madame Gabin closed the window. Then, he left the room. I heard his steps descending the stairs.

Well, it was all over; I was condemned. My last hope disappeared with that man. If I did not wake up before to-morrow morning at eleven o'clock, I should be buried alive. And that thought was so terrible, that I lost consciousness of what was about me. It was like a swooning in death itself. The last noise I heard was the click of the scissors of Madame Gabin and Dede. The death-watch began. No one spoke. Marguerite had refused to sleep in Madame Gabin's room. She was there, half lying in the depths of the armchair, with her beautiful face pale, her eyes closed and the long lashes wet with tears; while, seated before her in the shadow, Simoneau gazed at her.

BURIED ALIVE.

III.

I cannot tell of my agony during the next morning. It has remained with me like a horrible dream, in which my sensations were so singular, so troubled, that it would be difficult to describe them exactly. What made my torture frightful was that I was always expecting to awake suddenly. And, as the hour of the funeral approached, terror gripped me harder and harder.

It was only toward morning that I again became conscious of people and things about

BURIED ALIVE.

me. The grinding of a fastening drew me out of my comnolence. Madame Gabin had opened the window. It must have been about seven o'clock, for I heard the cries of the peddlers in the street, the shrill voice of a ragamuffin selling chickweed, another hoarse voice crying "carrots." That noisy awakening of Paris calmed me at first: it seemed impossible that they would put me into the ground in the midst of all that life. A memory came to reassure me. I remembered having seen a case like mine when I was employed at the hospital at Guerande. A man there had slept during twenty-eight hours. His sleep was so profound that the doctors hesitated to commit themselves. Then, that man sat up, and he was able to get up right away. I had been sleeping already twenty-five hours. If I awoke at about ten o'clock there would still be time.

BURIED ALIVE.

I tried to account for the people who were in the room and to figure what they were doing. Little Dede must have been playing on the landing, for, the door having opened, a child's laugh came from without. Evidently, Simoneau was no longer there: no sound revealed his presence. The slippers of Madame Gabin shuffled over the landing. At last, someone spoke.

"My dear," said the old woman, "you make a mistake not to take some of it while it is hot. It will sustain you."

She was addressing Marguerite, and the soft dripping of the filter on the mantelpiece apprised me that she was making coffee.

"It is not just for the sake of talking," she continued, "but I really needed that. At my age, it doesn't do one any good to stay up all night. And the night is so sad, when

BURIED ALIVE.

there is misfortune in the house. Do drink some coffee, my dear,—only a drop.”

And she forced Marguerite to drink a cup.

“Well? It’s warm and it restores you. You need strength to go through the day. Now, if you were wise, you would go into my room and wait there.”

“No; I wish to remain,” answered Marguerite resolutely.

Her voice, which I had not heard since the preceding evening affected me. She was changed, crushed by grief. Ah! dear wife! I felt her near me like a last consolation. I knew that she did not take her eyes off me, that she wept for me with all the tears of her heart.

But the minutes passed. There was a noise at the door that I did not at first explain to myself. It sounded like the moving of a piece of furniture that was being

BURIED ALIVE.

knocked against the narrow stair-case. Then, I understood when I heard Marguerite again burst into tears. It was the coffin.

"You come too soon," said Madame Gabin, angrily. "Put that behind the bed."

What time was it, then? Nine o'clock, perhaps. So, that coffin was already there! And I had seen it during the night, quite new, with its boards hardly planed. My God! Was everything about to end? Was I to be carried off in that box that I could feel at my feet?

I had, however, one supreme joy. Marguerite, feeble as she was, insisted upon giving me the last attentions. It was she, who, aided by the old woman, dressed me with the tenderness of a sister and a wife. I felt that I was once again in her arms as she put on each of my garments. She stopped, giving way to her emotion; she clasped

BURIED ALIVE.

me close, she bathed me with her tears. I longed to return her embrace, crying, "I live!"—but I remained powerless. I had to abandon myself as a lifeless mass.

"You are wrong,—all that is lost," said Madame Gabin.

Marguerite replied in her broken voice,—

"Leave me alone. I want to put on him our handsomest things."

I comprehended that she was dressing me in my wedding-clothes. I still had those clothes, which I counted upon wearing in Paris only on state occasions. Then she subsided again into the armchair, exhausted by the effort she had just made.

All of a sudden, Simoneau spoke. Doubtless, he had just come in.

"They are below," he murmured.

"Good! It is not too soon," answered Madame Gabin, lowering her voice. "Tell

BURIED ALIVE.

them to come up. We must get through with it."

"I am afraid of the despair of that poor woman."

The old woman seemed to reflect. She resumed,—

"Listen, Monsieur Simoneau. You must take her by force into my room. I don't want her to remain here. It is doing her a service. During that time, with a turn of the hand, everything will be put in order."

These words struck to my heart. And what were my feelings when I heard the frightful struggle that took place! Simoneau approached Marguerite, begging her not to remain in the room.

"For Heaven's sake," he implored, "come with me; spare yourself an unnecessary sorrow."

BURIED ALIVE.

"No, no," repeated my wife, "I will remain to the last minute. Only think,—I have no one but him in the world, and when he is gone I shall be alone!"

Meanwhile, Madame Gabin, near the bed, whispered in the young man's ear,—

"Go along, pick her up and carry her out."

Was Simoneau going to take Marguerite and carry her off like that? Instantly, she cried out. Transported with fury, I wanted to jump up. But the springs of my flesh were broken. And I remained rigid, not able even to lift my eyelids to see what was taking place there before me. The struggle continued; my wife clung to the furniture, repeating,—

"Oh! Have mercy! Have mercy, sir! Let me go! I do not wish to!"

BURIED ALIVE.

He must have seized her in his vigorous arms, for she uttered only a few childish cries. He carried her out, the sobs died away, and I pictured them,—he, tall and well-built; and she, weeping, crushed, yielding, following him hereafter, wherever he would lead her.

“The deuce! That was no easy job!” murmured Madame Gabin. “Well, let’s make haste now that the road is clear.”

In the jealous anger that possessed me, I regarded that removal as an abominable abduction. I had not seen Marguerite since the day before, but I had heard her. Now, it was finished; they had taken her from me; a man had robbed me of her even before I had been laid in the ground. And he was with her, on the other side of the wall, alone consoling her, embracing her, perhaps.

BURIED ALIVE.

The door opened again; heavy footsteps came into the room.

"Hurry! Hurry!" enjoined Madame Gabin. "The little lady may come back!"

She spoke to strangers, who answered with grunts.

"I, you understand, I am not a relative. I am only a neighbor. I have nothing to gain by all this. It is through pure goodness of heart that I take charge of their affairs. And it is not very gay! Yes, yes; I was up all night, even though it wasn't any too warm toward four o'clock. But I have always been foolish,—I am too good!"

At this moment, they dragged the coffin into the middle of the room, and I understood. Well, I was condemned, as the awakening did not come. My ideas were losing their lucidity, everything turned round in me in a black cloud; and I felt such a lassi-

BURIED ALIVE.

tude that it was something of a relief not to count on anything any more.

"They did not spare the wood," said the hoarse voice of the undertaker's man. "The box is too long."

"Well, he will be comfortable in it," answered another facetiously.

I was not heavy, and they congratulated themselves, for they had three flights to go down. As they grasped me by the shoulders and the feet, Madame Gabin suddenly grew angry.

"That confounded child!" she cried. "She has to have her nose in everything. . . . Just wait! I'll make you look through cracks in doors!"

It was Dede who pushed the door ajar and put in her towsled head. She wanted to see them put the gentleman into the box. Two vigorous slaps resounded, followed by

BURIED ALIVE.

an explosion of sobs. And when the mother returned, she talked about her daughter with the men who were placing me in my coffin.

"She is ten years old. She is a good kid, but she is curious. I don't beat her every day. But she must learn to obey."

"Oh! You know," said one of the men, "all the kids are like that. When there is a dead body anywhere about they are always hanging around."

I was stretched out comfortably, and I could have imagined that I was still on the bed, except for the cramped position of my left arm which was pressed against a board. As they said, I had plenty of room, thanks to my small body.

"Wait!" cried Madame Gabin. "I promised his wife to put a pillow under his head."

BURIED ALIVE.

But the men were in a hurry. They crammed the pillow roughly under my head. One of them was looking for the hammer, swearing meanwhile. They had left it downstairs; he had to go after it. The cover was put on. I felt a jolting of my whole body as two strokes of the hammer drove in the first nail. That was in, and I had lived through it. Then, the nails went in rapidly, one by one, while the hammer rang in measured strokes. They might have been packers, nailing up a box of fruit with their cool skill. Thereafter, noises reached me muffled and prolonged,, vibrating in a strange manner, as if the pine coffin were transformed into a great harmonic box. The last words that reached my ears, in that room in the rue Dauphine, was the advice of Madame Gabin,—

BURIED ALIVE.

“Go down easy, and look out for the railing on the second floor,—it is broken.”

They carried me away. I had a sensation as if being rolled about in a choppy sea. From this moment, my recollections are vague. I recall, however, that my unique preoccupation, foolish and mechanical, was to keep track of the route we followed to the cemetery. I did not know one street in Paris, I did not know the position of the large cemeteries, of which I had heard the names. But that did not prevent my concentrating the last efforts of my intelligence in an endeavor to divine whether we turned to the right or the left. The hearse jolted me over the stones. Around me, the rumbling of carriages, the footsteps of passers by, made a confused clamor that the sonority of the box augmented. At first, I followed the route with more or less clearness. Then,

BURIED ALIVE.

there was a halt; I was being carried; and I surmised that we were at a church. But when the hearse moved on again, I lost all idea of the districts we were going through. A peal of bells apprised me that we were passing a church; a softer and more continuous sound of wheels led me to believe that we were rolling along a driveway. I was like a condemned man led to the place of torture, stunned, awaiting the blow that did not fall.

They stopped; they drew me out of the hearse. The noises had ceased; I felt that I was in a deserted spot, under the trees, with the wide sky over my head. Doubtless, several persons had followed the hearse,—tenants of the hotel, Simoneau and others—for I could hear whispering. A hymn was sung, a priest babbled some Latin. Then there was a tramping about for a couple of

BURIED ALIVE.

minutes. Suddenly, I felt that I was sinking, while the ropes sawed against the angles of the coffin like violin bows, producing sounds like a cracked bass-viol. It was the end. A terrible shock, resembling the roar of a cannon, burst slightly to the left of my head; a second shock fell at my feet; another, still more violent, fell upon my body, with such a detonation that I thought the coffin must have broken in two. And then I fainted.

BURIED ALIVE.

IV.

How long did I remain thus? I could not say. Eternity and a second are the same in oblivion. I no longer existed. Little by little, confusedly, the consciousness of being returned. I still slept, but I began to dream. A nightmare evolved from the blackness that barred my horizon. And this dream was a strange fancy that had often tormented me in former days during my waking moments, when, with my nature predisposed to horrible inventions, I tasted the atrocious pleasure of creating catastrophes for myself.

BURIED ALIVE.

I imagined that my wife was waiting for me somewhere, at Guerande, I think, and that I had taken the train to go to rejoin her. As the train was passing through a tunnel, all of a sudden a frightful noise crashed like thunder. A double landslide had taken place. Our train had not been hit by a single stone, the coaches were intact; but at both ends of the tunnel, before and behind us, the arch of the tunnel had fallen in, and we found ourselves in the center of a mountain, immured by blocks of rock. Then began a long and frightful agony. No hope of help; it would require a month to clear the tunnel. And that task demanded infinite precautions and powerful machinery. We were prisoners in a sort of cave without egress. Our death were but a question of hours.

BURIED ALIVE.

Often, I repeat, my imagination had dwelt upon that horrible idea. I varied the drama endlessly. I had for actors, men, women, children, more than a hundred persons, a crowd that constantly furnished me with new episodes. There were some provisions on the train; but they soon gave out, and, without reaching the point of devouring each other, the starving wretches fought ferociously for the last crust of bread. There was an old man who was beaten back by blows and who was expiring; there was a mother who fought like a wolf to defend the three or four mouthfuls reserved for her children. In my coach, a young married couple gave their last gasps in each other's arms; and they no longer hoped; they no longer moved. Beside the train, the way was clear. Passengers got down, prowled along the train, like freed animals in quest

BURIED ALIVE.

of prey. All the classes intermingled. A very rich man, a high functionary, wept upon the neck of a workman, addressing him as "Thou." After the first few hours, the lamps had gone out, the fire in the locomotive had been extinguished. When one passed from coach to coach, he felt along the wheels to prevent knocking himself, and thus reached the locomotive, recognizable by its cold boiler, its enormous sleeping sides,—useless force, mute and motionless in the dark. Nothing could be more frightful than this train, thus walled up entire underground, as if buried alive, with its passengers who were dying one by one.

I delighted in all this; I went into the most horrible details. Shrieks broke through the shadows. Suddenly, a neighbor that one could not see would fall against one's shoulder. But, what caused me greatest

BURIED ALIVE.

suffering was the cold and the lack of air. Never had I been so cold; a mantle of snow fell over my shoulders, a heavy dampness rained upon my head. And I suffocated besides; it seemed to me that the arch of stone crumbled upon my chest, that the whole mountain weighed upon me and crushed me. Meanwhile, a cry of deliverance had resounded. For some time, we had imagined that we heard in the distance a muffled sound, and we lulled ourselves with the hope that rescuers were working near us. Help did not come that way, however. One of us discovered an aperture in the tunnel, and we all ran to look at this well of air, at the top of which we could see a blue patch as large as a wafer. Oh! What joy in that blue patch! It was the sky! We reached up to breathe. We saw distinctly some black specks that moved about. Without doubt,

BURIED ALIVE.

they were workmen putting up a windlass in order to rescue us. A furious clamor arose. "Saved! Saved!" issued from every mouth, while trembling arms were raised toward the little patch of pale blue.

It was the violence of that clamor that woke me. Where was I? Still in the tunnel, doubtless. I found myself lying flat, and I felt, to right and left, hard walls that pressed my sides. I tried to rise, but I struck my head violently. The rock, then, was all around me? And the blue patch had disappeared, the sky was no longer there. I still suffocated; my teeth chattered.

Suddenly, I remembered. Horror made my hair rise; I felt the frightful truth run through me, from head to foot, like an icy wave. Had I at last emerged from that syncope, that had held me for long hours rigid as a corpse? Yes, I moved, I ran my

BURIED ALIVE.

hands along the boards of the coffin. A last test remained to be made. I opened my mouth, I spoke, calling Marguerite instinctively. But I had shrieked, and my voice, in that pine box, had sounded so hoarse and startling, that I was terrified. My God? Was it true? I was able to walk, to shout that I was alive, and my voice would not be heard. I was shut up, crushed under the earth!

I made a supreme effort to calm myself and to reflect. Was there no way of getting out? My dream recommenced; my head was not yet clear; I confounded the well of air and its patch of sky with the reality of the trench in which I was suffocating. My eyes were wide open; I peered into the gloom. Perhaps I might discover a hole, a crack, a point of light! But nothing but fiery sparks passed in the darkness;

BURIED ALIVE.

red spots of light grew large and vanished. Nothing! A black chasm, unmeasurable. Then, lucidity returned; I thrust aside this idiotic nightmare. I needed all my head, if I wished to attempt to save myself.

At first, the great danger appeared to be in the suffocation which increased. Without a doubt, I had been able to remain so long without air, owing to the syncope which suspended the functions of existence. But, now that my heart was beating, and my lungs breathing, I should be smothered if I did not very soon find a way out. I suffered equally from cold, and I feared to allow myself to succumb to that mortal numbness of men who fall in the snow never to rise again.

Even while repeating to myself that I must be calm, I felt fumes of madness mounting to my head. Then, I exhorted my-

BURIED ALIVE.

self, trying to recall what I knew about interments.

Very probably, I was in a five-years' concession. That robbed me of a hope, for I had noticed formerly at Nantes that in the common trench, the feet of the last coffins buried protruded from the banked-up earth. It would have sufficed in that case for me to force of plank in order to escape, while if I was in a grave entirely filled up, I had upon me a heavy covering of earth which would be a terrible obstacle. Had I not heard it said that, in Paris, they buried at a depth of six feet? How could I pierce that enormous mass? If I succeeded in breaking open the coffin, would not the earth enter, shifting in like fine sand, and fill my eyes and mouth? And that again would be death, a horrible death, a drowning in the mud! Meanwhile I felt carefully about me.

BURIED ALIVE.

The coffin was large, I moved my arms with ease. I could find no crack in the walls. To right and left, the planks were roughly planed, but solid. I bent my arm back over my chest to feel above my head. There I discovered, in the plank at the end, a knot that gave slightly when I pressed it. I worked hard at it, and ended by driving out the knot and plunging my finger through the hole into the earth,—a greasy, clayey, wet earth. But that did not advance me. I even regretted having dislodged the knot, for now the earth could enter. Another experiment absorbed me for a moment. I tapped all over the coffin to discover if, by accident, there were any spaces to right or left. Everywhere, the sound was the same. As I thus gave light taps with my feet, it seemed to me that the sound was clearer at the bottom. Perhaps it was merly an effect of the sonority of the wood.

BURIED ALIVE.

Then, I began by extending my arms and giving slight thrusts with my fists. The wood resisted. I brought my knees into play, arching myself. There was no sign of cracking. I ended by using all my strength; I pushed with my whole body, so violently that my bones ached. And it was at this moment that I went crazy.

Until then, I had resisted the vertigo, the breaths of rage that rose in me like the fumes of intoxication. Above all, I had suppressed the cries, for I well knew that if I shouted, I was lost. All of a sudden, I began to shout, to shriek. It was stronger than my will, the shrieks issued from my contracted throat. I called for help in a voice that I did not recognize, becoming more and more enraged at each shout, screaming that I did not want to die. And I dug my nails into the wood, I twisted my-

BURIED ALIVE.

self with the convulsions of a caged wolf. How long did that spell last? I do not know; but I can still feel the implacable hardness of the coffin in which I battled, I can still hear the tempest of cries and sobs with which I filled those four planks. With a last glimmering of reason, I wanted to restrain myself, and I could not.

A great prostration followed. I awaited death, in the midst of a painful drowsiness. That coffin was of stone; I could never succeed in breaking it open. That certainty of defeat left me inert, without courage to attempt a new effort. Another suffering, hunger, was added to the cold and suffocation. I was fainting. Soon, this torture became intolerable. With my finger, I managed to secure, through the knot-hole, a few pinches of earth. I ate this earth, which redoubled my torment. I bit my arms, but

BURIED ALIVE.

not daring to draw blood; tempted by my flesh, I sucked at my skin with a desire to sink my teeth into it.

Ah! How I longed for death at that moment! All my life, I had trembled at the thought of oblivion; and now I wished it, I called for it, it could never be too black. What childishness to fear that dreamless sleep, that eternity of silence and of shadows! Death was good only because she struck one down forever. Oh! to sleep like a stone, enter into the clay, and exist no more!

My wandering hands continued mechanically to feel over the wood. Suddenly, I pricked my left thumb, and the trifling pain aroused me from my numbness. What was it? I searched again; I found a nail,—a nail that the undertaker's man had driven in askew and that had not caught in the

BURIED ALIVE.

wood of the box. It was very long, very pointed. The head was caught in the lid, but I felt that it moved. From that moment, I had but one idea: to have that nail. I began to work on it. It did not give; the task was hard. I often changed hands, for my left hand was in an awkward position and tired quickly. As I worked, a complete plan developed in my mind. This nail became my salvation. I had to have it. But would there still be time? Hunger tortured me; I had to stop, overcome by a vertigo that left my hands limp, my mind vacillating. I had tasted the drops that oozed from the prick in my thumb. Then, I bit my arm, I drank my blood, goaded by misery, revived by this warm and acrid wine that moistened my mouth. And I returned to the nail with both hands; I succeeded in tearing it out.

BURIED ALIVE.

From this moment, I was confident that I would succeed. I dug the point of the nail into the lid and I tracted a straight line, as extended as possible, along which I drew the nail in an attempt to make a groove. My hands stiffened; I persevered with fury. When I thought I had made a sufficient incision in the wood, I turned upon my stomach, and, raising myself upon my knees and elbows, I pressed upward with my back. But, though the lid cracked, it did not split. The incision was not deep enough. I had to turn over and begin the work again, which I did with the greatest difficulty. At last, I made a new effort, and that time, the lid split open from one end to the other. Certainly I was not saved yet, but hope filled my heart. I had ceased to push, I did not move for fear of causing a cave-in which would engulf me. My plan was to use the

BURIED ALIVE.

lid as a protection, while I worked to form a sort of well in the clay. Unfortunately, that work presented tremendous difficulties. The heavy clods encumbered the planks so that I could not manage them; I should never be able to reach the surface; already the shifting earth bend my back and thrust my face into the earth. Fear again seized me, when, in stretching out to find a brace, I thought I felt the plank that closed the coffin at the foot give under the pressure. So, I kicked vigorously with my heel, thinking that there might be at that spot a trench that was just being opened.

All of a sudden, my feet broke through into emptiness. My surmise had been correct; there was a newly opened trench. I had but a thin partition of earth to pierce before rolling into the pit. Great God! I was saved!

BURIED ALIVE.

For a minute, I lay on my back, my eyes looking skyward. It was night. In the sky, the stars glistened in a velvety blueness. Momentarily, a breeze brought to me a warmth of spring, an odor of trees. Great God! I was saved, I breathed, I was warm, and I cried and babbled, my hands devoutly raised toward space. Oh! How good it was to live!

BURIED ALIVE.

V.

My first thought was to go to the guardian of the cemetery, and to have him conduct me back to the hotel. But ideas, still vague, stopped me. I should frighten everybody. Why hasten, as long as I was the master of the situation? I felt my limbs; they were sound with the exception of the slight wound made by my teeth on the left arm. And the mild fever that resulted from it excited me, gave me unhopd for strength. I certainly could walk without help.

BURIED ALIVE.

So, I took my time, All sorts of confused reveries crossed my mind. I had felt near me, in the pit, the tools of the diggers. I felt that I should repair the damage I had done, fill up the hole, so that no one would know of my resurrection. At that moment, I had no clear idea; I simply considered it unnecessary to publish my adventure, feeling almost ashamed of being alive since all the world believed me dead. In a half-hour, I succeeded in effacing all traces. Then, I jumped out of the pit.

What a beautiful night! A profound silence reigned in the cemetery. The black trees made motionless shadows in the midst of the whiteness of the tombs. As I tried to get directions, I noticed that one-half the sky glowed as if with the reflection of a fire. Paris was there! I turned in that direction, following an avenue, in the obscurity of the

BURIED ALIVE.

branches. But, after fifty steps, I had to stop, already breathless. I seated myself upon a stone bench. It was not till then that I examined myself. I was completely dressed, even to shoes, and I lacked nothing but a hat. How I thanked my dear Marguerite for the pious sentiment that had inspired her to dress me! The sudden memory of Marguerite brought me to my feet. I wanted to see her.

At the end of the avenue, a wall stopped me. I got up on a tomb, climbed over the wall, clung to the coping a moment, then dropped. It was a hard fall. Then, I walked for several minutes along a wide deserted street that ran around the cemetery. I had no idea where I was; but I repeated to myself, with the stubbornness of a fixed idea, that I was going to enter Paris again and that I should be able to find the

BURIED ALIVE.

rue Dauphine. People passed; I did not even question them, seized, as I was, with a sort of suspicion, not wishing to confide in anyone. To-day, I know that I was already in the throes of fever and that my mind wandered. At last, as I turned into a wide thoroughfare, I reeled with dazzling sparks before my eyes, and fell heavily to the pavement.

Here, there is a blank in my life. For three weeks, I lay unconscious. When I finally awoke, I found myself in a strange room. A man was taking care of me. He related to me simply that, having picked me up one morning on the Boulevard Montparnasse, he had kept me in his home. He was an old doctor who no longer practised. When I thanked him, he answered shortly that my case had appeared curious and he wished to study it. Besides, during the first

BURIED ALIVE.

days of my convalescence, he did not permit me to address any questions to him. Later, he did not ask me any. Yet eight more days, I kept my bed, my head weak, not even trying to remember, for remembrance was a fatigue and a fear. When I should be able to go out, I would see. Perhaps, in delirium, I had mentioned a name; but the doctor never alluded to anything I said. His charity remained discreet.

Meanwhile, summer had come. One morning in June, I obtained permission to take a short walk. It was a superb morning,—one of those bright sunshines that give youth to the old streets of Paris. I went along quietly, questioning the passers-by at each crossing for the rue Dauphine. I reached there, and it affected me to see again the hotel that we put up at. A childish dread agitated me. If I appeared suddenly be-

BURIED ALIVE.

fore Marguerite, I feared the shock would kill her. The best would probably be to get word to that old woman, Madame Gabin. But it displeased me to put anyone between us. Down in the depths of me, there was a great void, like a sacrifice accomplished long since.

The house was yellow with sunlight. I had recognized it by the one-eyed restaurant on the ground floor, from which our meals had been sent up. I raised my eyes, I looked at the last window on the third floor, to the left. It was wide open. All of a sudden, a young woman, dishevelled, her dressing-sacque awry, came out upon the balcony and leaned upon the railing. Behind her, a young man who had followed her, bent forward and kissed her neck. It was not Marguerite. I was not at all surprised. It seemed to me that I had dreamed that and other things that I was about to learn.

BURIED ALIVE.

For a moment, I remained in the street, undecided, thinking of going up and questioning those lovers who were still laughing in the sunlight. Then, I decided to go into the little restaurant. No one could possibly recognize me; my beard had grown during the fever, my face was hollow. As I sat down at a table, I saw that very Madame Gabin bring in a cup to buy two cents' worth of coffee. And she planted herself in front of the counter and engaged in the gossip of the day with the proprietress. I listened intently.

"Well, has that little thing on the third floor made up her mind yet?" asked the woman.

"What can you expect?" answered Madame Gabin. "It was the best she could do. Monsieur Simoneau has proved himself such a friend! He had fortunately finished his

BURIED ALIVE.

business, a large inheritance, and he offered to take her with him to his home, to live with an aunt of his who needs a companion."

The woman at the counter laughed. I had buried my face in a paper, very pale, and the paper shook in my hands.

"Without a doubt, it will end in a marriage," continued Madame Gabin. "But I swear to you, upon my honor, that I have seen nothing out of the way. The little one mourned for her husband, and the young man conducted himself properly. Well, they went away yesterday. When she is no longer in mourning they will do what they will,—yes?"

At this moment, the door that led into the alley opened wide, and Dede entered.

"Mamma, aren't you coming up? I am waiting. Come quick."

BURIED ALIVE.

"Soon. You annoy me!" said the mother.

The child remained, listening to the two women, with her precocious air of a hayden raised on the streets of Paris.

"Well, after all," explained Madame Gabin, "the deceased was not worth Monsieur Simoneau. I didn't take to him,—that rail! Always whining! And not a penny! Ah, no. A husband like that is disagreeable for a woman with blood in her veins. While Monsieur Simoneau,—rich, strong as a Turk. . . ."

"Oh!" interrupted Dede. "I saw him one day when he was washing. He has hair on his arms!"

"Will you go away?" cried the old woman, giving her a shove. "You are always putting your nose where it has no business."

Then, in conclusion:

BURIED ALIVE.

"The other one did well to die. It is a great piece of luck!"

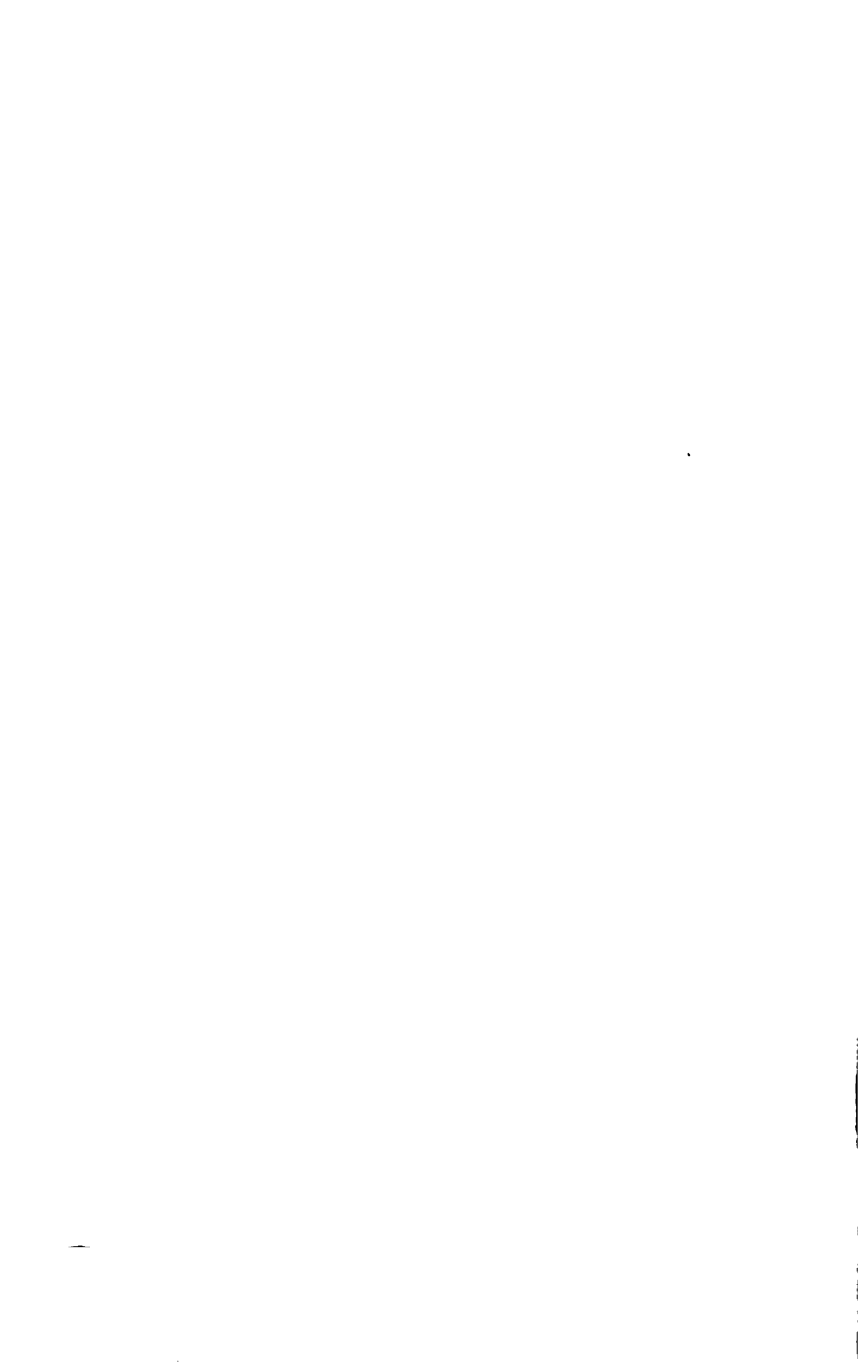
When I again found myself in the street, I walked slowly, with unsteady legs. Yet, my suffering was not unbearable. I even smiled on seeing my shadow. In effect, I was very unprepossessing. It was a queer idea of mine to marry Marguerite. And I recalled her boredom at Guerande, her impatience, her sad and weary life. The dear woman was good. But I had never been her lover; it was a brother that she mourned. Why should I disturb her life again? When I raised my head, I saw the garden of the Luxembourg before me. I entered and sat down in the sun, dreaming sweetly. The thought of Marguerite melted me now. I imagined her in the country, a lady in a little village, very happy, very beloved, very much sought after. She grew more beauti-

BURIED ALIVE.

ful; she had three sons and two daughters. Ah, well! I was an honest man to be dead, and I should certainly not be guilty of the stupidity of resuscitating myself.

Since that time I have travelled widely. I am a mediocre man, who has worked and eaten like the rest of the world. Death no longer affrights me. But it does not seem to want me, now that I have no object to live for, and I fear that it has forgotten me.

18. 10. 1957



JUL 7 - 1943

